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ABSTRACT

One way to help students develop literary analytical skills is to combine literary transactional theory with focused free-writing activity. By adapting and using Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, literature teachers show students the stages by which the literary experience of a creative work is recreated by the student and incorporated within the student's own life experience. These stages include engagement or initial involvement with the work, perception, interpretation, and evaluation. The activity that seems to help students bring out their responses at each stage is focused free writing before, during, and after their reading of the literary work. This writing helps students create a more explicit, ordered context for their encounters with unfamiliar literature, and it usually places the primary emphasis on the active transaction between text and reader instead of on either text or reader. The repetition of the full critical sequence and all the writing activities need not be completed with every text that students examine; but repetitions of the four stages periodically in beginning literature courses can help inexperienced readers internalize the analytical process so that eventually these students replace such "pedagogical scaffolding" with more natural, intuitive literary responses. (RL)

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Developing Literary Understanding:

A Transactional Approach

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Inexperienced readers are usually confused and frustrated by the remoteness of literary criticism. This is, of course, not surprising since most criticism is written for professionals who have spent thousands of hours reading, thinking and sharing their ideas about literature. Our students have not. Since students typically come to our classes with a limited background in reading, they find the rationale for critical inquiry puzzling, the language mysterious, and the conclusions, esoteric and arbitrary. But the bewilderment of our inexperienced readers need not be cause for alarm. If we conceive of critical reading as a developing process, then they are simply at an earlier stage of literary understanding. The challenge we face is to discover ways to become more efficient in guiding our students along this continuum of increasing responsiveness, helping them to understand how the complex mingling of an active reader and a literary text can clarify and illuminate, delight and instruct.

Besides not having read very extensively, our students generally have not written much either. This makes literary criticism doubly confusing. As experienced readers and writers, we clearly understand that both these activities are processes, requiring frustrating, recursive gropings from vague, dimly-realized ideas to fully formulated conceptions. Literary criticism is especially deceiving because the finished, edited product is usually orderly, specific, confident, and, especially with formalist approaches, seemingly objective and comprehensive. Missing are the unstructured responses of the first encounter, and the messy, uncertain drafts that led up to the controlled, edited copy.

Unfortunately, most inexperienced writers think that we spontaneously generate fully edited, articulate prose; that we write down clearly what we already know. But this is a dangerously debilitating misconception. Writers compose essays, often discovering the essence of what they want to say during the process of writing. In fact, in a recent article Barrett Mandel notes that, "Writing doesn't lay out the notions that are lying dormant in the mind waiting to be displayed . . . the process itself unfolds truths which the mind then learns. Writing informs the mind; it is not the other way around."[1] When C. Day Lewis said, "We do not write in order to be understood; we write in order to understand," he was echoing Henry Miller's insight that, "Writing is a voyage of discovery." Our profession's uneven success with exposing students almost exclusively to finished products has prompted me to concentrate instead on how critical ideas are generated, developed, clarified and organized. For students, this "behind-the scenes" building process can be illuminating and comforting.

From this perspective, the process of interpretation parallels the process of writing: we did not read, say, "A Rose for Emily" or "Araby" once and sit down to write a final drift, cleverly explicating all the structural and thematic nuances. In fact, by the time I came to teach Faulkner's story, I had read it again and again, discovering each time new responses and unseen possibilities. And that process was informed by long graduate training and a dozen years of teaching. Because we have travelled far in our understanding of literature, we often forget how

halting and limited our reactions were before our professional training turned our attention from emotional responses to the systematic scrutiny of organic unity.

To be convincing, the rhetoric of persuasion teaches us, a speaker or writer needs to anticipate bias, dissipate fears, and answer objections. When we try to persuade our students to read more fully, we need to understand how much they know and what their attitudes toward learning and literature are. Because many students have neither been able to unscramble the jargon of literary criticism nor to understand how evaluation and interpretation emerge, they are usually skeptical about their ability to contribute to critical dialogue. It took me some time to realize that students often develop subtle survival skills that only simulate learning, quickly mimicking the language of critics. This is easy enough to do, and I can remember being praised for a Faulkner paper I wrote in high school by merely stringing together impressive jargon about inexplicable urges and inextricable destinies. Perhaps we need to remember that for many students reading literature is not and will never be a formal object of study.

To help them understand their reactions as readers, they need a solid foundation to build upon, one based on initial, emotional responses and grounded in their own experience. Since Jerome Bruner reminds us that the discovery of knowledge involves the mind's intuitive and systematic processes, it would not be surprising if a pedagogy of literary understanding beginning with intuitive response and followed by analysis was not invariant.[2]

Because our responses are now telescoped and intuitive, we also need to remember that our classroom performance with a text might be as disabling to our students as formal literary criticism: As critics we are simply not accessible models for our students. But as teachers, we can be quite valuable in guiding readers and writers through the critical process stage by stage, allowing them to see how meaning slowly reveals itself to us during an active interaction with the text.

In an introductory literature course I taught in the City University, I led my class through a sequence of activities I hoped would help them develop confidence and skill in handling their preliminary responses to literature and thereby move them closer to the mature, critical processes of experienced readers. This method has been influenced by Louise Rosenblatt's continuing development of transactional theory and Janet Emig's and James Britton's work in composing.[3]

The technique requires students to write before, during and after the reading. This writing, continuous and focused, helped students create a more explicit, ordered context for their encounters with unfamiliar literature. And because it was nonstop writing, a more natural, spontaneous persona usually emerged. The primary emphasis throughout was on neither the text nor the reader, but on the active transaction between them. Specifically then, a work of literature is, as Louise Rosenblatt suggests in The Reader, the Text, the Poem:

> . . . not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text. The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshalls his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem.[4]

As a first step, before my students read Updike's "A & P," I asked them to do five minutes of focused free writing that described their feelings and ideas about bosses, rules and other tedious blue collar realities. Since many of my students did this type of work, responses were immediate and authentic. Many of these open-admission students had a poor academic self-image; consequently, they did not think their opinions counted for much. As a defense, they were often passive during class discussion, allowing themselves to be swayed by the more aggressive, articulate speakers. An important aim of this first focused free writing, then, was to commit the reluctant, and raise their consciousness about some of the social and personal values they would confront in Updike's tale of conformity and rebellion.

Writing helps us to shape and interpret; it can thereby move us closer to understanding experiences and clarifying values. Before we read "A & P," I asked the class if they would defend someone's right to wear unusual clothes in a supermarket. Some said they would, others were doubtful. By asking for these value-based speculations, I was trying to give importance to the

rich, culturally diverse experiences and attitudes my students brought to the university. The passive, defensive personas I encountered were often constructed because many traditional classroom strategies negated, even belittled their isolation from the high culture. Unfortunately, this kind of anxiety stifles real learning by forcing the self to withdraw into a protective posture. And unless there is an active intellectual and emotional commitment, learning becomes mechanical and ephemeral. All our hard work then becomes the victim of the inevitable "decay of learning."

Although the importance of the reader's contribution to literary understanding goes back at least to Aristotle, I now sense a fresh perspective, typified by Michael Polyani's realization that the "ideal of strict objectivism is absurd."[5] And since complete subjectivity clearly limits a student's chance for dynamic literary growth, the renewed interest in transactional approaches suggests that there will now be a more informed emphasis on both the reader and the text, on both the process and the product.[6] For teachers of non-traditional students, this is good news indeed.

I am suggesting that the first step in becoming an active, engaged reader is to write. After we had read about a third of Updike's story in class, I asked for five more minutes of continuous writing. This time the students described their feelings about Sammy, the main character. My enthusiasm for weaving writing into the process of reading comes from writing's ability

to suggest unrealized possibilities. By providing space for these readers to pay attention to the images, feelings, attitudes and associations that the text evoked in them, I hoped they would become conscious of the crucial interactive nature of literary study. When E. M. Forster said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" he was talking about writing's power to discover and suggest. The fluency of free writing helped to liberate my students from grammatical and organizational constraints and concentrate on the many faceted experience of aesthetic reading.

It is often easier to create graceful, powerful, critical performances with poems and stories if we are emotionally moved. As critics, we often ponder over a subtle thematic matrix, or a structural nuance because the magic of reading moves us; we are touched so much that we are compelled to act. We learn best what interests us. If our students cannot feel that literature touches their experiences and their values, or even their image of themselves as students, they will read literature as if it were sociology, economics or analytic philosophy. Then we will have form and no content: an impressively inaccurate map of the territory. But if students enter each reading with a personal stake in the process, the next three stages of critical inquiry - Perception, Interpretation and Evaluation - can become natural, almost inevitable.

Although the intuitive and analytic responses of experienced readers are often blended and embedded into one another, for teaching purposes I considered four discrete stages. In this

system, initial Engagement or Involvement is followed by Perception.[7] In this phase, the reader begins to contemplate that first impression by noticing the details in the text that elicited the Involvement. As attention shifts from the inside to the outside, the reader tries to fit the fictional world into his own universe in ways that make sense of both. This third stage is Interpretation and the meanings that each of us uniquely extracts from this transaction is used in the fourth stage - Evaluation - to make judgments.

My students' first reactions to Sammy were, of course, mixed: some found him sympathetic, others disagreeable. At this point I was interested in real engagement: the reasons for their opinions would come later. To emphasize the individual nature of reading, I asked a dozen students to read a minute of their free writing. We then finished the story in class and once again I asked them to write continuously for five minutes. This time I asked for an overall assessment of Sammy's decision to do battle with his provincial culture.

When I asked students to read from this writing, it was obvious that some had changed their minds; some saw him now as a rebel, others as an impulsive fool. Throughout, I tried to make it clear that the purpose of these short writing exercises was to help them clarify and discover opinions. Since we were all in the process of coming to grips with our personal responses to this story, the question of how far we were from critical authority was irrelevant.

There seemed little point in starting to build the scaffolding of literary appreciation unless my students could first see

that the critical process has its genesis in authentically felt personal response. I tried to locate and organize these subjective judgments by having students write about their own attitudes toward work and conformity before they read "A & P." Writing during the reading helped students to articulate the reading experience. After the story was completed, another free writing session asked for more reactions to Sammy and his world. All this is still the first stage of the critical process. It is crucial to build this solid foundation, but it is also necessary to move beyond pure subjectivity. And, again, writing can be used efficiently to engage the second, more systematic mental process.

To build a bridge, then, between Engagement and Perception, I asked my students to read Updike's story again before the next class, and to free write for ten minutes, attempting this time to note the concrete, specific details that evoked their primary reaction. This movement between the abstract and the concrete, between what they thought and why, is a guiding principle of rhetoric and an important intellectual skill for all critical thinking. By explaining that they liked Sammy because he refused to be intimitated by authority or that they distrusted him because he was just trying to impress the girls, my students were connecting effect to cause. The concreteness and linearity of writing ennabled the students to make this interplay more explicit. This, in turn, helped them rethink the original generalization. This recursive transaction between emotion and reason brought them back again and again to the text for a closer look and so

gave substance and authority to their first impressions. And as certain details of the story were made to fit first one student's generalization and then another's, they began to see how a healthy, critical diversity develops from necessarily individual perceptions. The idiosyncratic nature of some of these responses only highlighted the truly personal basis of literary understanding.

The process I am suggesting shifts the teaching focus from the kind of subjectivity that has more to do with self discovery and psychology than with literary understanding. As Rosenblatt notes, the reader recreates his own work of art through the transaction of reader and text. This is a more useful perspective for teaching purposes since it suggests to the instructor the important role of guiding beginning readers through the process of critical inquiry. Although subjective criticism might enable a student to develop important insights into the characteristic way he/she responds, this knowledge doesn't help students read more fully.

Transactional teaching moves students beyond egocentricity. One student, for example, insisted that no nineteen-year-old he ever heard spoke like Sammy. He saw him as false, unrealistic. He was, however, willing to see Sammy's detailed observation of the girls as probably, understandable. He wrote that Sammy sounded phoney in the beginning, but later, sympathetic. When I asked him if he was always so consistent, he began to sense that Sammy's stilted language was appropriate to his artificial environment. The student intuitively knew that we all need to

adapt our tone, structure and phrasing to varying audiences for different purposes. Pondering both his own writing and Updike's, looking first at his views and then at Sammy's language, this student was learning how to interpret, how to make sense out of fictional worlds. It was becoming clear to him that the rebel in Sammy was frustrated and dismayed about losing himself forever in the too carefully ordered world of the supermarket. Although this is not scholarship, or even an especially astute insight, it is still a beginning, a first step at the edge of metaphor and symbol and all the disturbing, haunting epiphanies that empathy and catharsis work on willing, experienced readers.

I've found that transactional strategies can create fertile conditions for growth and discovery. Inexperienced readers need to learn that it is important for them to bring their own values and experiences to a text, but they also need to see that the longer they interact with a text the more they understand about themselves and the work. In a very real sense, they recreate again what Updike has already recreated from his experience.

Interpretation, the next phase of the critical process, can also be clarified and enhanced by writing. Since meaning cannot be extracted from a work without reference to the reader's previous experiences, I asked the class to go back to their notebooks to read their original positions about blue collar work. I asked them to compare Sammy's reaction to theirs: Was Sammy more principled or less? Was he realistic, typical? Was he more a victim of circumstances than you, or less? Connecting

and comparing their universe and its values to Updike's symbolic transformation of his reality was useful in helping them arrive at a coherent meaning. The intersections of those worlds in writing usually encourages mimetic interpretations but that seemed, at this point, a useful and accessible vantage point.

Writing, as the psycholinguist Lev Vygotsky notes, is a deliberate structuring of the web of meaning.[8] By encouraging a continuous, spontaneous stream of thoughts, opinions, ideas, and reactions, writing can help an inexperienced reader decode a literary text in response to his unique personality. This shuttling helps writers to interpret, to move beyond Engagement and Perception by generalizing and drawing inferences from the similarities and differences made clear in the first two stages.

If students have been active participants throughout all this reading and writing, then this last stage, Evaluation, has probably already been blended into the process. But for emphasis, I asked for a final mimetic judgment that most developed from their perceptions of how neatly Updike's world paralleled theirs. It it was close, Updike was judged to be perceptive, the story successful; if their perceptions differed too much, then Updike's "A & P" was considered inaccurate and unrealistic. This was, then, a first step toward critical maturity.

In this sequence, I asked students to write before, during and after reading, hoping that through the composing process they would come to a better understanding of how much literature depends on active, creative readers. There is a need first to help our students clarify the rich experiences they come to us with, not

only to motivate them to see literature as relevant, but also to emphasize our acceptance of who they are and what they've done. To begin their introduction to literature with "the work itself" makes little pedagogical sense. We certainly did not start our reading of literature at this systematic level. Since we want them to be more conscious, responsive readers and learners, I suggest we see ourselves less as dispensers of knowledge and more as guides, first encouraging and enhancing personal involvement, and later helping them to develop more cogent interpretations and more persuasive evaluations. Although all four stages need not be completed with every text, the repetition of the full critical sequence can help inexperienced readers internalize the process. Eventually, this pedagogical scaffolding will be gradually replaced by more natural, intuitive responses.

But for most of our students that kind of autonomy is in the future. For now, we can be crucial in developing their literary understanding by encouraging in our classes transactions that help students, through emotion and reason, to recreate literature's sweetness and light.

Notes

[1] Barrett J. Mandel, "Losing One's Mind: Learning to Write and Edit," CCC, (December, 1978), 362-368.

[2] Jerome Bruner, On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962).

[3] Louise M. Rosenblatt, Literature as Exploration, 3d. ed. (New York: Noble and Noble, 1976; now distributed by MLA); Janet Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (NCTE Research Report No. 13, Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1971); James Britton, Language and Learning (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1972).

[4] Louise M. Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 12.

[5] Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964); see also Roger Poole, Towards Deep Subjectivity (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972).

[6] Louise M. Rosenblatt, "Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading," Journal of Reading Behavior, 1 (Winter, 1969), 31-47. Norman Holland also notes that "perception is a constructive act," but places so much emphasis on the reader's defenses, expectations, fantasies and transformations (DEFT) that the teaching perspective is muted. See, "The New Paradigm: Subjective or Transactive?" New Literary History, VII (Winter, 1976), 335-346; The Dynamics of Literary Response (New York:

Oxford, 1968); Five Readers Reading (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); with Murray Schwartz,"The Delphi Seminar," College English, 36 (March, 1975), 789-800.

[7] Alan Purves and Victoria Rippere, Elements of Writing About a Literary Work: A Study of Response to Literature (NCTE Research Report No. 9, Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1968).

[8] Lev S. Vygotsky, Thought and Language, ed. and trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1962).